



*hiram r. diaz III*

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**Scripturalist**  
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## **The “Conversation” We All Need to Have**

Having spent years reading and studying post-modernist/post-structuralist philosophy prior to my conversion, it is worrisome to hear how much postmodernist jargon has crept into so many churches. The current “social justice” movement among professedly evangelical brethren is, it seems, the main source of such jargon, but the jargon itself is rooted in the anti-Christian philosophical presuppositions of postmodern/post-structuralist philosophers. The problem is that these key words fly under the radar of most believers because they are used in appeals for Christians to act like Christ.

This is a manipulative technique that suggesting that any Christian who questions why certain key terms of postmodernism and post-structuralism are being used by social justice advocates does not care about “marginalized” peoples and “communities,” or about “opening up a space” for dissenting voices to “dialogue” about their differences. Scrutinizing the language and concepts employed by social justice advocates in evangelicalism is, in other words, is seen by

them as being equivalent to literally reinforcing the “unjust” structures of power that are already in place.

The charge, of course, is false. And to see this, we need to take a look at what these terms and concepts mean, since they don't align with the teaching of Scripture.

## **Defining Post-Modern and Post-Structuralist**

These two key philosophies need to be grasped first, so let's define them. First, post-modernism is an intellectual movement that opposes the main concepts of philosophical modernism. For instance, modernist philosophers believed that words and reality had some point of identity between them. Modernist philosophy understood language to be pointing beyond itself to an objective reality that is accessible to everyone. Postmodernism says that because language is a socially & historically developed human means of communication its ability to communicate is always constrained to a particular time and place and human history. Language doesn't point to a transcendent reality (God or anything else), but is almost like a form of currency that people use in social interactions. Words refer to words, etc. There is nothing outside of human systems of communication, which are themselves solely the products of a purely human history.

Modernists viewed the universe and everything in it as having fixed structures that could be discovered by anyone with the ability to reason (either from empirical data or propositions believed to be axiomatic to all human reasoning). Postmodern, however, says that structures, like languages, are always socially & historically determined and are, therefore, inherently unstable. Whereas the modernists viewed all people groups as sharing certain universal structures of things like personhood, sexual identity, religious practices, and so on, postmodernists say that there are no such universal structures. Rather, there are structures that are always changing, whose definitive characteristics are changed as people dialogue with one another.

Poststructuralism, which preceded postmodernism, denies the universe and everything in it has fixed structures that are universally discoverable by human reason - after all, even "Reason," for the post-structuralist, is a socially & historically determined idea that is not universal, and which will not endure forever. Post-structuralism seeks to undermine what are considered to be fixed structures in religion, language, politics, art, science, mathematics, philosophy, and anywhere else where the

notion of “structuralism” has been generally accepted.

The result of postmodernism and post-structuralism is simple - There are no overarching narratives to why life is the way it is, since a narrative is a structure made of words and both are constantly undergoing social & historical modifications. There is no “transcendental signified,” as post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida put it, since language and social interactions between persons are purely horizontal realities that are formed by dialogues negotiating the terms of engagement for every aspect of our lives.

## **Identifying the Key Terms and What they Really Mean**

Before identifying these key terms, it's important to note that they are so frequently heard that we often don't think much of them. They are, in some cases, everyday words, but they have very different philosophical connotations when used in the context of social justice thinking.

### **1. "Centering" vs. "Decentering"**

If the various parts of human social life are like spokes on a wheel, then the "center" of those parts of human social would be the hub of a wheel. Since postmodern & post-structuralist (hereafter, simply postmodern or postmodernist) thinking denies that there is an overarching narrative that ties everything together, they also deny that any one center accounts for every aspect of human social life, or metaphorical "spoke." Our different perspectives are tied together by hubs that are relative to our own historical, social, racial, gendered, and so on, perspective. This means that any one proposed "center" is illegitimately put forward as "the" center of all human social interaction.



The theorist's goal is to "decenter" such illegitimately universalized centers. Decentering occurs when the center which has enjoyed a long history is scrutinized, critiqued, deconstructed, and moved out of place by the proposal of some other center. Postmodernism ultimately aims at always decentering any proposed center that begins to take on a universal and absolute explanatory function.

## **2. "Privilege" vs "Marginalization"**

"Centered" aspects of human social life are, therefore, "privileged" because they enjoy a position of explanatory and, therefore, social power. Postmodernism maintains that for every privileged idea, person, group, etc, there is an equally non-privileged idea, group, person, etc whose "voice" has been suppressed. The marginalized, according to postmodern philosophers, however, is really the seed-bed of the privileged.

When postmodernists view history, therefore, they question the role of traditionally dominant figures and their accomplishments, seeking to identify the "hidden" or "suppressed" voices of the figures who made

those dominant figures' accomplishments possible. For example, if I were to say that the good social changes brought about during the Renaissance were made possible by the contribution of three male figures (this could be anyone for our present example), the postmodernist would object by pointing to the suppressed voices of women during this time (e.g. female academics, poets, and so on). The goal of the postmodernist is not merely to decenter, but to center the marginalized.

### **3. "Conversation" or "Dialogue"**

The process of marginalizing the privileged and privileging the marginalized is not intended to ever come to an end. There is no perceivable end goal that is not temporal and liable to change given some time. Rather, since the postmodernist rejects transcendence, he views everything as horizontally related. In other words, rather than having the Word of God, or some other authoritative voice in philosophy or religion or science, come to us as the objective and authoritative way in which human social realities are to be properly organized, understood, and interacted with/acted upon, the postmodernist views all interactions between parties as conversations.

Whereas modernist philosophers like Hegel and Marx saw life as a dialectical - i.e. back and forth conversational - movement that would result in an ultimate synthesis at the end of history wherein all conflicts and contradictions are resolved, the postmodernists see no end to this dialectical movement. This is reflected in the speech of social justice advocates who repeatedly speak of “conversations” “we need to have.”

For the postmodernist, there is no top-down communication from a transcendent source to us; rather, all communication is purely horizontal, human, historical, social, and immanent.

#### **4. The “Gaze”**

This specific word is not used as often, as far as I can tell, but its main ideas are definitely present in the complaints of social justice advocates. The “gaze of the other” is a way of talking about the scrutiny of one’s behaviors and thoughts by another person or institution which has illegitimately identified itself, or been identified by others, as authoritative. It is a tool of “oppression” because it illegitimately defines as wrong or bad or unacceptable the

thoughts and behaviors of others that it has deemed incompatible with its center, privileged concepts, and ultimate goals.

Those who have written about the “male gaze” are, therefore, referring to the scrutiny of women’s thinking and behavior by men through various personal and institutional mechanisms. Those who have written about the “white gaze” are saying much the same thing only as regards race. The white “race” is viewed as that entity which uses scrutiny to exclude others (i.e. marginalize others). The social consequences of this are oppressive because they silence other voices, cultures, ways of thinking, and so on that are equally authoritative.

## **5. “Violence”**

Postmodernism views certain ways of thinking as directly related to certain forms of social interaction. This is because everything is viewed as the product of horizontal, historical, social interactions. If we negotiate the terms of our social interactions, i.e. if we “have a conversation,” we are not engaging in violence. However, if I tell you that your culture, way of life, actions, thoughts, etc are wrong, immoral, irrational, and the like, I am

metaphorically engaging in violence. This is an indirect act of violence because it is ultimately tied to explicit acts of violence.

For the postmodernist, the system of thought and the social reality are inseparably linked. If you have a system of thought that centers God as Father, the postmodernists see this as inseparably linked to a society which privileges the male perspective. The male perspective becomes the “lens” through which women are scrutinized (i.e. they are subjected to the “male gaze”), their perspective is illegitimately suppressed (i.e. marginalized), and they are socially given a secondary or “invisible” role in society. Violence, in other words, is not necessarily physical or directly emotional but intellectual and indirectly emotional.

## **6. “Colonization” vs. “Decolonization”**

Postmodernism gave rise to a form of social studies called postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism seeks to interpret the histories of people groups who existed under the colonial rule of White European males. Given what we’ve said above about there not being any one narrative to explain all others, nor there existing any one center around which all

other ways of thinking can and must be properly arranged and examined, etc, it follows for the postmodernist that one can “colonize” others by means of scrutinizing their way of life, thinking, etc according to one’s illegitimately privileged perspective, and telling them to act in conformity with that privileged perspective or suffer the consequences.

The consequences, again, are called violence, and violence can be metaphorical/indirect or actual/direct/physical. Decolonization is, therefore, the reversal of “colonization” not only physically but primarily intellectually. This entails the rejection of thinkers who write from an outsider’s perspective, seeing as they are, by their very act of thinking and writing, subjecting others to their critical gaze, illegitimately, and oppressing them.

When people say that theology needs to be decolonized, they are suggesting that theology needs to be completely separated from any thinker whose gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation is representative of the majority of theologians with whom non-whites have come into contact by means of historical actual forms of colonization. This reduces to

epistemological relativism and must, therefore, be rejected.

## **7. “Justice”**

Biblical justice is judgment formed and executed according to God’s Law. The perspective of human ontological equality is one that derives from the transcendent nature of God’s Law. He is our Creator and we are all his creatures. We are all, therefore, subject to the same law; and we are all found guilty or innocent by means of the same judicial procedure. This isn’t what social justice advocates mean by “justice.” Rather, given all that we have said above, for the postmodernist the kind of equality that all people have is dialogical/dialectical. Because we all speak from our own perspectives, we alone can speak for ourselves.

Postmodern justice, then, comes about through a negotiation of the terms of agreement between any two or more parties. We act justly only when we recognize the legitimacy of another’s viewpoint and seek to act in a way that accommodates his view without compromising its authenticity. We also act justly, then, when we seek to remove any overarching categories of judgment that

are not derived from the persons which we are judicially examining. So the postmodernist will view the decentering and decolonization of white male theologians as an act of justice, seeing as doing so will avert the “white gaze” that has served the function of oppressing non-white, non-male voices through metaphorical and actual violence.



## **Concluding Remarks**

We need to understand that for the postmodernist, the philosophical & ideological are inseparable from the physical & actual. Consequently, in order to avoid actual violence the postmodernist wants to eliminate metaphorical violence. This removal of metaphorical violence is perceived as an act of justice because it acknowledges the radical equality of ideological and cultural perspectives.

What is common to all of these terms is an implied notion of conflict between those in power and those who do not have power. This way of looking at the world is not Christian; it is Hegelian and Marxian. It is a philosophical ideology that contradicts the Scriptures' teaching regarding knowledge, the nature of man, the nature of society, the nature of government, the nature of truth, and many other doctrines.

Social justice advocates appeal to the common sensibilities of Christians by claiming to be on the side of the oppressed and the voiceless. However, who are the oppressed and the voiceless? Anyone whose perspective is

identifiable as sub-orthodox, or unorthodox, or incompatible with orthodoxy in the areas mentioned already - social life, gender roles & relations, foundational ideas about law and governance, etc.

The social justice movement is contrary to the Christian faith not merely on the surface, but at a deep ideological/philosophical level that must be exposed. This can only take place when we think about the language such advocates are using, how they are using it, and then choose our own words wisely. This takes effort, and under the pressure of a world that is constantly attempting to guilt Christians into support its causes this is hard to practice. However, as the Spirit of God renews our minds, he also changes the kind of speech we use. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, the Holy Spirit will also cause us to grow in the exercise of our thinking and our speech.

Soli Deo Gloria

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